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WHERE THE HEART IS

WILL IRWIN

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From Auche

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WHERE THE HEART IS

"To their merry Christmas—and ours.'"

[Page 43.]

WHERE THE HEART IS

Showing That Christmas Is What You Make It

BY

WILL IRWIN

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK AND LONDON: MCMXII

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WHERE THE HEART IS

I

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!" chirped Miss Wilson. "Say, I beat you all *to* it, ten seconds before the flag! I won't be here in the morning to speak those words personal, because I'm off on the eight-twenty-nine to old home-day in the custard pie belt." Miss Wilson's cheeks glowed under her black picture hat; her round, jetty eyes snapped.

"Merry Christmas!" responded the

other boarders. And each had excitement in his voice, open or suppressed according to his temperament.

A quickened atmosphere beat through the rather bare, black-walnut dining-room. Everything spoke of broken routine—the clatter of tongues, the dishes half-eaten or carelessly pushed aside, the spray of holly in the hair of Martha, black maid-of-all-work. Further, Miss Wilson's neat, gray traveling suit, Mrs. Hepburn's costume of new brown brilliantine, the English bag which Mr. Withers had deposited at the door, spoke of immediate departures.

Miss Wilson hung her coat on the back of her chair and cast about a

roving eye. She rested her gaze on the pink, callow, somewhat repressed youth at the foot of the table.

"You won't be here Christmas Day, will you, Mr. Cordingly?" she asked.

Although Mr. Cordingly was the youngest person at Mrs. Parrott's and, in brain and experience, probably the least considerable one, all matters of taste, personal conduct, and family affairs were referred to him as by right. It happened so because the boarders had learned, quite early in his stay, the truth about him and his antecedents. He was, in fact, son of Jedehiah C. Cordingly, *the* Cordingly of the great New Haven valve company, planted now

in New York to learn the selling end of the business with a wholesale house. His father, who held old-fashioned views, had ruled that he must live within his salary during his two years' apprenticeship; and he managed very well by means of secret and timid additions from his mother. Too young for matrimonial plans, too reserved for flirtation, he held, nevertheless, a clutch upon the imagination of the sprightly Miss Wilson and the slow, rather affected Miss Violet Worth, actress-out-of-an-engagement, who sat at his right.

"No," said Mr. Cordingly, with his own simple reserve, "I'm going north at eight-thirty myself."

"To the New Haven house or the

country place at Noroton?" insinuated Miss Wilson, at one and the same time parading her knowledge concerning the habits of Our Best Society, and satisfying her private curiosity.

"The governor always opens the country house for Christmas," replied Mr. Cordingly with a burst of confidence rare in him. "He has all the people on the place at the house Christmas Eve. I'll get home before ten, and the tree will be all lighted when I arrive—they'll just about be starting to distribute the gifts. The next day, Christmas dinner—children and grandchildren—twenty of us. It's a great tableful." He stopped suddenly. Never before

had he so far committed himself concerning the habits of his family. But an unwonted brightness in his eye, a flush in his cheek, showed that he was all in a fever of anticipation.

"Well, it's lovely to be with your folks again," commented Miss Wilson with an unexpected soft sympathy. "And it's great to have 'em near enough so you can run home Christmas. I wouldn't have 'em way out in Kansas for the old farm. My Cousin Charlie promised to meet me with the cutter if there was snow enough. I guess," she added, glancing out of the window, "the weather's made good for him all right. And Cousin Sophie's been fattening that

turkey since September. How about you, Violet?"

Miss Worth dropped her fork to her plate with a flutter, lifted her eyes and trained them on Miss Wilson with another flutter, and held the pose. So long had she been doing society parts—they were her specialty—that the voice and gesture of her working hours had become the manner of her private moments. What was affectation in others was nature in her.

"Think of it," she said, and her voice swelled with well-trained vibration. "Christmas at home with one's own!" She made the proper stage pause before she continued. "And this year I'm to be with my very

own. I've two old aunts in Staten Island—dear things! I really ought to visit them oftener than I do, and I want to go, but my work is in New York or on the road, so what would you? Every Christmas for years they've wanted me to come down, but I've always been trooping. But this Christmas falls just between engagements, so I'm going over to-night." Her voice fell richly, and again her eyes fluttered downward. "Dear old ladies! What fun it will be! I know just what they'll have for dinner. I know by heart every piece of linen and china and silver that they'll put on the table. I know that with the flaming Christmas pudding will come a present to me over which

they've been working since September. There'll be just we three, doing all the work together and chatting over old times. Dear Aunt Lettie! Dear Aunt Em!" Miss Worth's eyes glistened and moistened. Perhaps she herself would have found it hard to say whether or no she was acting at that moment. Nevertheless, she produced on her audience the effect of all good emotional histrionics. Miss Wilson's face changed perceptibly; the direct and practical Bob Withers looked far away; Mrs. Hepburn quite openly removed her glasses and wiped them.

"Ah," she said, when she had resumed her glasses and patted into place the disturbed white waves above

her ears, "I, too, am fortunate! An old seminary friend whom I've just found this year has come to New York to live on Riverside Drive. I go there to-night until over Christmas. A houseful of children!" she added, brightening. "I don't know when I've seen a children's Christmas. And Christmas is so incomplete without them!"

"Mine will be complete then, all right, all right!" exclaimed Bob Withers cheerfully. "No race suicide in the Witherses. All sorts from Kindergarten to College. One grand jag of joy. Say, you'd have expired to see me raking the department-store getting presents for sizes from six months to sixteen years.

That bag there would fit up the holiday rally of the Brooklyn Sunday-School Union. Funny, ain't it, we've all got people close to New York? Guess everybody's accounted for." Then he stopped, and his eyes traveled to the one who had not yet spoken. Five other pairs of eyes followed his to the head of the table, where the Colonel sat.

They had forgotten the Colonel.

II

IT was easy to forget him, so quiet, so self-effacing, so altogether detached did he appear. He was a little old man with a drooping white mustache, and a pair of straight, ingenuous blue eyes filmed with reserve. Following the New York rule of impermanence, none of the rest had arrived at Mrs. Parrott's earlier than last summer. They found him there when they arrived; and they called him "the Colonel" because they had heard Mrs. Parrott apply that title, and

because he spoke in a Southern accent. The title was more nearly accurate than they knew. He had, indeed, served in the Civil War; and he had handed over to his conqueror the sword of a boy lieutenant.

Success sat not at Mrs. Parrott's table. All these people were about to arrive, or the arrival had been postponed forever. Miss Wilson, assistant suit-buyer at Silverstein's, had her feet already on the bottom rungs of the ladder. The future stretched assured before Mr. Cordingly—that he was his father's son sufficed. Mr. Withers, clerk in a brokerage house, was rising; in a year, Mrs. Parrott's would see him no more. Miss Worth had passed the climax and missed it;

now she was maintaining a brave front by exaggerating about prospective engagements. She supported herself by giving elocutionary readings in Brooklyn—did it secretly, for she would have died rather than confess elocution. The climax had long passed for Mrs. Hepburn, childless widow; she was living on a small annuity and on the bounty of relatives in Chicago, who paid her board that they might keep her away. But for none was the scroll so completely rolled and tied as for the Colonel. His day had passed; his hopeful striving was done. Sixty-eight years old, without money, without abilities, he worked as curator of a small private library.

The pause which followed on Mr. Withers's remark grew embarrassing. It was Miss Wilson who, with the rough-and-ready tact which she had acquired in her business, threw herself into the breach.

"Will you be here Christmas, Colonel?" she asked.

"Yes," replied the Colonel, raising his innocent, quiet blue eyes, and dropping them again.

"Some different from old days in the South before the war," ventured Mr. Withers.

"Yes," replied the Colonel as shortly as before.

Miss Wilson opened her lips to speak. They wore a softer expression than usual. She must have

thought better of it, for she closed them without sound. The boarders looked at one another, and then at their plates. The distant roar of an elevated train, the whir of a starting taxicab, the kitchen-clatter of Martha, the maid, became perfectly audible in the dining-room.

The pause was broken by the entrance of Mrs. Parrott, head of the boarding-house, and Miss Newton, her sister. They proceeded to the little side-table at which they always dined alone and in silence. Mrs. Parrott, widow, and Miss Newton, old maid, were cast from the same mold. Only the metal of Mrs. Parrott had been poured colder and more amply. Both were faded ashen-

blonde in hair, faded white in skin. Their faces were a little impassive—mark of their profession. Beneath, however, struggled the softened expression of better days. There was about Mrs. Parrott, somehow, a deadened liveliness. There was about Miss Newton a very ghost of girlish gayety. Mrs. Parrott was a little the more plump, a little the stronger in the features, a little the more stolid. In appearance, as in conduct of life, she was the original and Miss Newton the replica. "It's sister this and sister that," remarked Miss Wilson once, "until if Mrs. Parrott broke her ankle, sister would stub her toe."

Miss Wilson used this entrance as

an excuse to turn the conversation.

"We were talking about Christmas, Mrs. Parrott," said she. "Sorry you can't get away for the holidays —too many of us animals to feed!"

Mrs. Parrott laughed perfunctorily and her sister echoed it faintly.

"I'm sorry—for us, of course—that most of *you* will be away," said Mrs. Parrott. "I should have tried to make it pleasant for you—"

"Sister had thought," supplemented Miss Newton, "that we might have egg-nog in the parlor."

An appreciative murmur came from the boarders. Out of it boomed the voice of Bob Withers.

"Much obliged, I'm sure, but I'm on the cart. I make it a point to present myself at home in good order."

Just here the Colonel rose. "If you'll excuse me, ladies!" he said. He hesitated a second. "Merry Christmas—a very Merry Christmas," he went on. The table responded cordially; but as his straight old back went through the door, the boarders exchanged looks again.

At eight o'clock Miss Wilson, tailored, veiled, and carrying a bag, met in the hall Miss Violet Worth, similarly attired and equipped.

"Fierce, ain't it, about the Colonel?" said Miss Wilson in an undertone. "Guess he's an old grouch for

sure, or he'd have some folks to go to. Think of passing Christmas in a boarding-house!"

"Oh, *think* of it!" murmured Violet Worth, and now the vibration had gone completely from her voice. "But I sympathize most with Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton. They seem born to better things. I'll take back all the mean things I've said about them. Well, they'll have a rest at least with only the Colonel to take care of—pretty near a holiday."

"If I was them," said Miss Wilson, "I'd ship him off to a restaurant. He's a fierce proposition to have around on Christmas Day."

"Well, perhaps they think—" be-

gan Miss Worth—"There! There's my taxi," she broke off in utterly unfeigned excitement. "Good-by, and a Merry Christmas again!" She fluttered down the stairs.

Bob Withers, packing, found himself out of dress ties; and since train time was near, he slipped across the hall to young Cordingly's room on a borrowing expedition. Precisely because he was the only person at Mrs. Parrott's—except the reserved Colonel—who did not yield to Mr. Cordingly a measure of social deference, Mr. Withers was the only boarder who enjoyed anything of his confidence.

"Say," remarked Mr. Withers when young Cordingly had produced

the tie. "Somewhat rough on the Colonel. No? Suppose he hasn't any folks. I don't think much of my family three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, but on the three - hundred - and - sixty-sixth—meaning Christmas—I'm mighty glad I've got one. Just think—no presents. Nothing but dinner alone at the big table, with the Misses Pie-Face eating all alone at theirs. Some tough!"

"It is pretty hard," acknowledged Mr. Cordingly. "I'd really like to leave him a present of some kind if I thought he'd take it right."

"I wouldn't. Hurt his Southern pride and all that. Probably send it back with a note. He's an F. F. V.

all right, if he *does* shave his neck in the back. Tough, though."

"Certainly is!" responded Mr. Cordingly.

In her private sitting-room, Mrs. Hepburn was writing the last of her Christmas letters.

"And I should like to have you know," she wrote, "how many are less favorably circumstanced than I. We have in this boarding-house a poor old gentleman who must spend his Christmas all alone here. Equally unfortunate are the two women who conduct the place. When I think that I, bereaved though I be, have so many blessings—"

She paused here and let a tear blot

the paper, an art at which she had grown adept.

"Poor old Colonel Havens," she sighed softly.

III

IT was twelve noon of Christmas Day when Miss Newton ventured forth from her room. She emerged a different woman from the tired drudge who had entered it at twelve midnight of the evening before. She was dressed in black silk, shot with a fine white line. Lace softened the throat and wrists. Strung on either arm were meager wreaths of Christmas greens, decked scantily with scarlet ribbon. In her hand she carried an old coffee-pot, silver-over-copper—carried it as

though it were glass. She stopped a moment in the dining-room to hang the wreaths in the window, and another to deposit the silver on the table.

"Merry Christmas, Martha," she greeted the quivering bulk of black flesh who presided in the kitchen. "Did you bring the Colonel's breakfast up to him promptly at ten?"

"Yas'm—yas'm—I sho'ly did," said Martha. "The Cunnel was pow'ful hungry, Mis' Newton. Yas'm—three cups of coffee. Yas'm, the Cunnel is sho'ly folks, Mis' Newton. He tol' me an' I tol' him all about them Christmas' we used to have in Vaginyah befo' de

wah. Ah sho'ly am grateful for that dress-pattern, Mis' Newton. Yas'm —I sho'ly am. The Cunnel—he give me two dollars, too. Yas'm."

"I'm glad you liked it, Martha," said Miss Newton. "There, there's the bell. It is the Colonel now, back from church, Martha."

"Yas'm."

"You may go now for the rest of the day, Martha," Miss Newton went on. "Be back promptly at seven to-morrow."

"Yas'm, Mis' Newton," Martha said, "I sho'ly will. Yas'm!"

"The Colonel came home from church, sister," Miss Newton greeted Mrs. Parrott, who, having dressed at a more leisurely pace, now entered the

kitchen. "The turkey's in and the vegetables on—and I've just sent Martha home."

Mrs. Parrott, also, looked rested. She bore about her, too, the same air of staid, middle-aged jubilance.

"He's coming down now," she said in a suppressed whisper. "Oh, Merry Christmas, Colonel," she called an instant later. And the Colonel stood bowing at the door. He wore a majestic frock-coat, long and single-breasted, a stiff, high collar, a black string scarf. His scanty gray hair was plastered with painful precision; his shoes shone even as his nails.

"I heard all the sounds of Christmas," he said, "and I smelled all the

smells of Christmas, and I wondered if I could be of any assistance?"

A negative was forming on Mrs. Parrott's lips, but Miss Newton put in a well-simulated question. "Haven't we forgot to dress the celery-salad?"

"Yes, and someone must mix the mayonnaise—"

"If you'd like to—"

"And know how—"

"I have done a right smart bit of housework—in the war and just after," replied the Colonel. "Some of us had to learn. May I remove my coat?" He doffed his ceremonial garment, hung it over a chair, stacked his cuffs in his sleeve. Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton had already cov-

ered their holiday finery with long, enveloping aprons. Mrs. Parrott insisted on draping the Colonel also.

"And remember, only a drop of oil at a time," she admonished.

"I'll be as stingy as if it were melted gold," replied the Colonel. And when, with much clatter of dishes and tongues, the mayonnaise was finished, and the celery dressed, and the beaten biscuits in the oven, and the turkey basted for the last time, it was the Colonel's privilege to help set forth the feast. Already Miss Newton had folded up and put away the long oak table of the regular boarders, had drawn to the center of the room their own private round-table. She made some magic passes

over a basket. Out came a damask table-cloth of quaint, old design, a set of silver, worn and solid and old, a lacy cover.

The Colonel straightened up after he had set down with mathematical precision the last of the knives.

"If you'll excuse me a moment, I'll add the finishing touch," he said; and he was gone upstairs. When he returned, he bore proudly in his right hand two red roses. Also, he was maneuvering to keep his left hand behind his back.

"The last in the shop this morning," he said.

"Oh, sister, come look!" cried Mrs. Parrott.

"Roses!"

"And such red ones!"

"And at this time of the year!"

"Not more beautiful," declared the Colonel in all the tones of conviction, "than the ladies to whom I have presented them."

Mrs. Parrott laughed and said:

"This to two old women."

And Miss Newton added proudly:

"You should have seen sister once!"

"In spite of your well-known temperance principles, Mrs. Parrott," broke in the Colonel, delicately leaving the compliment where it stood, "I hope you'll accept this addition to your repast." He drew his left hand from behind him, and handed Mrs. Parrott—a bottle. "Madeira," he

explained—"the remains of my Uncle Porter's cellar."

"Oh, thank you, Colonel—you remember the last, sister—"

"It tasted like elderberry wine—"

"But it's much more precious—"

"Liquor belongs," interrupted the Colonel, "to those who know how to use it. I'm sure you understand moderation."

"Well," said Mrs. Parrott, "the bottle you gave me last Christmas wasn't used up until Thanksgiving."

"It will never hurt you at that rate," declared the Colonel. "Miss Newton, may I assist with the turkey?"

He bore the platter to its place; he

opened the old Madeira and filled three glasses; he raised his own.

"To my charming hostesses," he said.

"To our charming guest," responded the sisters together.

The turkey, king of the feast, smoked royally center-table; about him steamed a court of side-dishes. For the ordinary days of Mrs. Parrott's boarding-house régime the French pretense of courses, but for this festal occasion an honest, old-fashioned American dinner which came upon the table a glorious whole. Never did egg hatch such a turkey as this, never did good corn feed a plumper breast, never did exercise of proud barn-yard struttings give

substance to more firm but tender legs.

The Colonel insisted on carving.

"But in the old South—" began Mrs. Parrott.

"The ladies always carved," finished Miss Newton.

"In Rome," responded the Colonel, "I do as the Romans do." Then he bowed as he rose and tucked his napkin over his white waistcoat. "Through all the antique world the Roman ladies were noted for their beauties and graces. And I'm sure this remarkable turkey will inspire even my awkwardness." Such had been the preliminary ceremonial these five years.

Indeed, so marvelously was that

turkey formed for its uses that it seemed to drop apart, at the merest touch of the knife, into the proper slices and joints. The Colonel sunk a spoon—old silver of the fruit-basket pattern—into its cavernous depths. The stuffing, as he drew it out, formed masses like new snow, so crisp was it, and yet so moist. The odor of herbs and chestnuts filled the room; and through it all ran a haunting, appetizing suspicion of garlic. And as he laid the slices of brown meat, the slivers of white meat, upon the plates, Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton garnished them from the honest side-dishes—a snowy hill of mashed potato, a golden hill of flaky squash, a yellow-brown hill of sweet potato.

Finally, as the only concession to modern ways, Miss Newton served in three of her little, old-fashioned willow plates that celery salad whose mayonnaise dressing the Colonel had mixed with such affectionate care.

Colonel Havens settled himself back, when the last full plate steamed at its place, with a long sigh of anticipation. And for a few minutes nothing was heard in the room but the clatter of knives on china and murmurs of appreciative satisfaction between mouthfuls.

"It is a pleasure to think," said the Colonel as he rose, knife and steel in hand, to carve a second helping, "that all our young friends are enjoying themselves with their kin."

"Yes, indeed," murmured Mrs. Parrott, "and—"

"It's nice that they all have homes so near," supplemented Miss Newton.

"Even Miss Worth," went on the Colonel, delicately guiding the point of his knife under the wish-bone, "—Let me give you a slice from the dark meat, Miss Newton—it's too bad Miss Worth is out of employment. I can't understand it. She has to me the manner of a remarkable actress."

"Quite like Mary Anderson," said Mrs. Parrott.

"Or Modjeska," added Miss Newton.

"I'm sure she'll succeed," resumed

the Colonel. "You can't keep merit down. And she'll feel all the better for her brave struggle. I have promised myself that when she secures an engagement I'll attend—though I seldom go to the theater. But I feel I owe it not only to her art but to her personal character."

"So good to Miss Wilson—" said Miss Newton.

"When she was sick—" this from Mrs. Parrott.

"A right fine young woman that Miss Wilson, too," said the Colonel, laying down his carving-knife and settling his napkin in his lap to enjoy his own second helping. "I scarcely approve of her sex engaging in the commercial struggle—an oc-

cupation like yours, ladies, seems more fitting to the ideals of gentle womanhood. But I suppose it is necessary in these times. And I think Miss Wilson must have extraordinary abilities—besides an attractive personality and real character."

"And so neat!" declared Miss Newton.

"She cleans her combs and brushes every day," supplemented Mrs. Parrott.

"But scarcely neater than Mr. Cordingly—"

"Still he has had his advantages."

"A young man of quality," put in the Colonel. "It is good to see wealth falling into such hands in a

time when wealth is often synonymous with vulgarity. I like to know that his father compels him to live on his earnings. It shows a proper idea of the formation of character. Such a father will never be disgraced in his son."

"And Mr. Withers is nice, too," interposed Miss Newton—and blushed ever so slightly.

"Very jolly and helpful and good-natured," added Mrs. Parrott. "He has never yet complained—not even when the furnace broke down."

"An exceptional set of young people," pursued the Colonel, expanding into generalities. "I'm sure you're fortunate to have them with you. Young and old, too," he added, "for

I sympathize with Mrs. Hepburn's lonely condition."

"She has told us all about it," said Mrs. Parrott.

"How unkindly she has been treated," added Miss Newton.

"Well," said the Colonel, "they're all having a merry Christmas with their own people. I wouldn't exchange any of their Christmas cheer for mine,"—he bowed again, and the two ladies, twinkling slightly, bowed back as one head,—"but I'd like for a moment to see Mr. Cordingly beside that Christmas tree, and Miss Worth with the two aunts of whom she's told us so much. I suppose they're right proud to have so distinguished a member in their fam-

ily." Then he raised the lees of his second glass of wine.

"To their merry Christmas—and ours," he toasted.

"To theirs and ours," responded the sisters together.

"Though mind—I wouldn't exchange," concluded the Colonel.

Then there was a mince pie, a triumph of a mince pie which had accumulated richness in Mrs. Parrott's crock through a whole autumn long. With it went no artificially ripened French cheese, but a slice—a slab if you will—of plain, yellow, American cheese, pleasantly harsh and yet mellow on the tongue. Followed a cone of oranges, of apples, of grapes, all filled out to one rounded whole with

raisins. And, as the diners stuffed the corners of their appetites, they continued to chat concerning the endearing personal peculiarities, the quite extraordinary merits, of Mrs. Parrott's boarders. I shall not conceal from you that if Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton had brought themselves on December 23, say, to make frank personal comment on their household, they might have recalled different anecdotes, given different estimates. But this was Christmas; and they spoke praises from sincere hearts.

IV

THE shades were falling when they had finished with their coffee. Mrs. Parrott it was who broke up the dinner by rising to light the gas.

"Permit me," said the Colonel, rousing himself from his pleasant lethargy, "to assist you in clearing things away."

"Oh, no—it won't take a minute—this is the one day of the year, you remember, when we don't wash the dishes right away—" began Mrs. Parrott.

"Martha does them with the breakfast things," supplemented Miss Newton. So the Colonel sat apart while Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton flew back and forth to and from the kitchen, dropping conversation as they worked.

"And now, Colonel," broke in Mrs. Parrott, stripping off her apron as she bustled through the door, "wouldn't you like to come upstairs to our sitting-room?"

"Nothing," replied the Colonel, rising and bowing, "would delight me more than to continue our conversation."

This dwelling followed the rule of boarding-houses. It was a relic of old gentility—in its time a mansion.

The sisters inhabited that low-studded pair of rooms which had been the nursery quarters of happier days. An open grate fireplace, very shallow and tiny, a marble mantel, the niche for a statuette now gone, recalled faded glories. Their personal belongings, relics of another past glory, fitted into their surroundings. Miss Newton's special chair was a little Windsor rocker of solid and serviceable hickory; Mrs. Parrott's was mahogany, carved with stiff bunches of grapes. The Colonel took, as if by custom, the big modern Morris chair at the table. The wall supported one old portrait in a flaking gold frame, and three enlarged crayon heads stared starkly from ovals of

walnut. Along the window-sill—though it was late December—blossomed three geraniums in pots. And above them a canary started into life at the sudden flare-up of the gas jets, and opened in mirthful song.

"*Do* smoke, Colonel!" said Mrs. Parrott.

"It makes one feel that there's a man about," supplemented Miss Newton.

"It's like home," added Mrs. Parrott.

"You were telling me last year," said the Colonel, "about your Uncle Arad and the war." As a matter of fact, Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton, strophe and antistrophe, had told him every Christmas in the past

four years about Uncle Arad and the war. This was only the preliminary, opening sentence to a ritual whose first solemn act was the production of the family photograph album.

"Did I show you his picture last year?" asked Mrs. Parrott, preserving the rules of decent reserve.

"I should like right well to see it again," declared the Colonel.

Mrs. Parrott went down to the bottom drawer of her dresser, produced a square of plush and gilt, opened its ornate clasp. She put it on the Colonel's knee; she and Miss Newton drew up to right and left, and strophe and antistrophe they began at the frontispiece.

"Grandfather Joel Curtis. Just think, he lived to be ninety—but he was only seventy when this photograph was taken—still he always looked just like that, even when they laid him out—"

"Grandmother Curtis—she was a Clapp of Norboro—granddaughter of old Squire Clapp. He used to own nearly everything round there. They'd lost it all before grandmother was born. Do you remember her, sister—"

"Indeed I do. Remember how she wouldn't go inside a house that burned gas for fear of suffocation —"

"But she hated electricity three times worse—it was newer."

"Uncle Henry Curtis when he was a boy—"

"He always kept that cowlick on his hair to the day of his death."

So, through six deceased and ill-favored relatives, all human expression drawn from their faces by the strained attention necessary to old-fashioned photography, they came at last to a photograph on which none, at first, made any comment. It was a bridal group of the seventies. He stood at her side. He was a stalwart man, spite of his pose; and his locks flowed as elaborately as his narrow cravat. The bride was seated, the over-ornamentation of a wide, gathered skirt making billows and crevasses about her. None could mis-

take the face; for it was of the kind which changes not its outlines with age. It was Mrs. Parrott.

They looked for a whole minute before Mrs. Parrott spoke.

"He lived only five years," she said.

"He looks like a man," said the Colonel.

"He was *that,*" put in Miss Newton. "The dearest brother—"

The Colonel lingered unaccountably on that page. He cleared his throat; he looked up.

"She was dressed like that," he said —"the late Mrs. Havens." Suddenly, impulsively, he put his hand to his inner pocket, drew out a small daguerreotype. The tarnished black

cover fell open, revealing a sweet, pointed face, still childish. Under her strained expression, as the girl held the pose for the camera, there seemed to burn always a smile, ready to burst out and blur the picture.

"The late Mrs. Havens—Miss Virginia Fairhaven—the year she consented to marry me," he said.

Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton gasped and murmured softly over her. She was a "perfect beauty," Mrs. Parrott said; "Sweetly pretty," said Miss Newton. It was astonishing how much the two ladies managed to convey of admiration and sympathy without any direct allusion to his loss.

"She lived only nine years," he

said. "My boy died, too. And I came North." He put back the little black box, and returned to the Curtis-Newton family album. And now something alert came into his attitude. For on that page, spaced into four little windows for old-time tintypes, were four photographs—such boy-soldiers as fight all our wars. One, standing at strained attention with his Springfield beside him, was dwarfed by his very gun. One, in the high boots and peaked cap of a cavalry-man, looked like a schoolboy who played at war. Only one appeared to be a man grown. He was seated, leaning his left hand on a sword, and his shoulder-straps bore the double bar of a captain.

"They were brave enemies," said the Colonel, gallantly. "They won because they had the resources, but they were brave—." Then, as though seeing the necessity of backing water, he added: "I cherish no animosities and I admire your great Lincoln. I'm free to admit I hated Sherman for a long time. But war is war. And there are necessities. It's not those who did the fighting who keep hatred in their hearts. We learned to respect you-all." His voice ran low. "But this is your Uncle—Captain Arad Curtis, is it not?"

"Captain Curtis, —th New York," said Mrs. Parrott. "He entered as a private. They made

him captain just before Petersburg —"

"For bravery on the field of action," supplemented Miss Newton.

"And he was killed just two days before the surrender at Appomattox. I don't understand all about it—something very brave. They were running toward the enemy, I think, and some of his men ran away and hid in the brush. He got them together and made them go on with him. By this time the rest had run away. But he and these men didn't know it, and they kept on—and of course they were all wounded or killed. He lived only a day. If he had lived just another day he would have learned—" She stopped there.

"That you had won," finished the Colonel. "Well, one side has to win. When I gave up my sword I felt for a minute that it would have been better if I'd died in the last action. But we get over that—and our feelings." He looked down at the photograph. "We'd have a right good time now, he and I, just talking it over."

His eyes dreamed away another minute. Miss Newton leaned lightly forward and shot with uplifted eyebrow a signal to Mrs. Parrott. But the latter shook her head, for the Colonel was beginning to speak.

"It was just before Christmas of '64 that I saw Lee last," he said. "South bank of the Appomattox. I wonder if any of the Northern army

knew what it was to be as hungry as we-all were those days? The Captain sent me up with a report to the General's house—he had an old farm building for his headquarters. I went on foot, because we were sparing our horses. And right there happened about the greatest piece of luck I ever had in my life. I kicked something in the road. Well, I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw what it was. It was half a boiled ham. How it got there I've never known to this day. Some raiders making camp dropped it, I reckon. If I found ten thousand dollars in the street to-morrow, it wouldn't seem so lucky. I wrapped it up under my cape, just unable to

think of anything but how good it was going to taste. You see," put in the Colonel parenthetically, as though he felt the need of apology for carnal appetites, "I wasn't much more than a boy. I enlisted at seventeen in '62; I was only nineteen then, and just wearing my Second Lieutenant's shoulder-straps.

"Well, I came to the turn of the road, and looked up. And there came the General with his staff. Some of the boys had been complaining. I'd heard them say that the General was living in a house, eating fried chicken, while we were eating bran and going meat-hungry. I thought of that, with the ham under my cape. I dropped it down so I

could hold it with my left hand when I saluted, and stood there by the road at attention.

"I hadn't seen the General for a year. But Lordee—what a year had done to that man! Then his hair was gray-brown—now it was almost white. Then his eyes were clear like a boy's—now they were old. And his face was pinched and hollow. You couldn't fool me. I'd seen that look often enough before. The General was hungry.

"Well, I went on up to headquarters with the report. And all the time I held the ham, and all the time I was thinking of the General and the way he looked. And when I got ready to start back, something struck

me. I wasn't much use to the Confederacy. He was everything. I just turned and went out to the kitchen. I found the nigger boiling a little handful of corn meal. I took out that ham and I said, 'Get a knife, nigger, and slice up this meat. It's for the General. And if I ever find you haven't fed it to him, you won't have to wait for the Yanks to get you.' And I went back and ate a corn cake and a little sliver of bacon for dinner that day. But thinking over it now it was the best Christmas dinner I ever ate—not excepting yours, Mrs. Parrott."

Mrs. Parrott and Miss Newton had heard the tale, in the same order and in nearly the same words, three

times before. But still they smiled at its mild pleasantries, said "Oh!" and "Ah!" at its grave events, as they had at the first recital. And when the Colonel had finished, and sat looking into the fire as though he saw there the long, gray lines straggling through the forests of Virginia, they made their accustomed comment.

"Sister and I have often said"—this Mrs. Parrott—"that the Southern ladies—"

"Must have suffered so much more," Miss Newton took it up, "than the Northern ladies."

"Because they were right in the midst of it and saw it all," concluded Mrs. Parrott.

Then Miss Newton leaned across the Colonel again and made silent question with her mouth.

Mrs. Parrott nodded eagerly.

"Would you mind closing your eyes, Colonel?" she asked, a childlike tone in her voice.

The Colonel turned, looked, and did as he was bid. Miss Newton put something in his hand and closed his fingers above it.

"Don't look until we tell you," she said. "Our Uncle Arad, after the battle of the Wilderness, found something among the truck they captured—"

"And he sent it home for a memento—" added Miss Newton.

"And we've kept it all these years,"

said Mrs. Parrott, "but we'd forgotten about it."

"And we came across it just yesterday," said Miss Newton. "Now open your hand."

It was only a little old silver token-button, very tarnished. But it bore the three-barred flag of the Confederate Union—and the motto: "Lee and Country."

There was a long silence while the Colonel sat gazing at his palm with all his sight. Imperceptibly, his eyes dimmed and moistened. Then he rose, squared his shoulders to attention, and put the token in his button-hole.

He hesitated for a second before he took the withered, toil-worn hands

of the sisters and kissed them one after another.

"You've made this a good Christmas," he said, "a good, good Christmas for an old man."

And as they three stood moist-eyed with the happiness which is so much greater and deeper than laughter can express, a series of sounds broke in upon them.

A key had grated in the lock downstairs; a step had sounded in the hall; the bell had rung.

"Sister, did you remember the bath-towel in Mr. Cordingly's room?" asked Mrs. Parrott.

"I believe I did forget it!" exclaimed Miss Newton. She hesitated.

"Good night, ladies—until next Christmas," said their guest.

"Until next year!" cried the sisters together; but the ring was gone from their voices.

The door closed on the Colonel.

V

MISS WILSON it was who had ascended the stairs. She deposited her suit-case in her room with a "whoof!" of relief, and sprawled out in her Morris chair. After a moment, she rose, removed her hat, passed a powder rag over her nose, and sought the front parlor. Mr. Cordingly it was who had rung the bell. He sat now before the gas log, his ulster over his arm, his stick across his knees—the picture of despondency.

"A Happy New Year!" said Miss

Wilson. "I'm up-to-date, and I want to get this Christmas thing out of my system. Gee! it was fierce! Have a good time yourself?"

"No," said Mr. Cordingly shortly. "I didn't."

"What's the matter? Not relations, I hope? I've had a dose of 'em myself."

Mr. Cordingly permitted himself, for the first time in his residence at Mrs. Parrott's, the luxury of a thorough personal confidence.

"The governor," he said, "made the mater own up that she'd been shipping me money to patch out my salary. There was the merry to pay." He resumed his gaze at the fire.

"Well, I've come to the conclusion," said Miss Wilson, disposing her skirts modestly to toast her feet at the gas log, "that relations are mostly a bunk. Gee! I didn't know there were so many Hirams and Karenhappuchs in the Wilson tribe. Ain't I glad to be back in little old New York!" And she, too, studied the gas flame with lowering brows.

The lock turned again to a double entrance. It was Miss Violet Worth escorted by Bob Withers.

"Hello, people!" called Miss Wilson. "Come in and reunite. How was Merry Christmas with you? I ain't making any bones about mine. I drew a lemon."

"Same here," remarked Bob With-

ers. "Did you have any kids in yours? Say, if there are any spits of the devil they're the kids of my Aunt Sophie. They bellowed and bawled and yelled and yowled for twenty hours steady."

"You wanter be thankful it wasn't jays, like mine," replied Miss Wilson. "How about your aunts, Violet?"

Miss Worth had not spoken yet. She had not even set down her suitcase.

"I've got the grippe, if you please. I slept in a room that was one hundred and ten below—a cover of snow on me when I woke this morning and the water frozen in the pitcher. Let me get close to that fire."

Miss Wilson threw herself back, and laughed immoderately.

"All accounted for except Mrs. Hepburn, and the more miserable time she had, the better she enjoyed it, I suppose." Suddenly she grew serious. "But I guess there's some worse off than we are," she said. "Think of the old girls, left here! My!"

"Sure," said Mr. Cordingly, waking to sudden sympathy, "and the grouchy Colonel—think of it!"

"It cer-tainly is fierce," said Mr. Withers as he took up his suit-case. "Christmas in a boarding-house! Gee!"

VI

MRS. PARROTT and Miss Newton lay in their darkened room, abed but not asleep. Mrs. Parrott heard Miss Newton's breath stop, heard it come back suddenly in a quick, staccato catch. From forty years of welded understanding, she knew what that meant. Miss Newton's eyes were moist like her own—and just then an uncontrolled drop rolled down her face to the pillow. Across the hall, Colonel Havens sat by his window. His light was out; but he had made no move toward

bed. His hand was closed above the little silver token, worn last in the War of the Two Republics. Down his cheek, also, coursed the first tear.

It sprang not from grief nor yet from joy, that tear, but from an emotion higher and purer than either—that spiritual yearning which is the sunshine of the soul. The beams from the street-lamp struck it as it fell; and it became one of the prisms of God which refract across this, our world, the Light of Bethlehem.

THE END

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